

## **[I'm Planning to Make a Come Back]**

### Life Story

I'm PLANNING TO MAKE A COME-BACK

A Depression Victim Story

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Even in the face of all that has happened to me,” said John Clarke, “I still believe I'm man enough to take a man's place in the world and have sense enough to make my own living.”

Those of us who have known him for many years and watched with interest as he built up a small fortune by arduous labor, believe that although he is 71 years old he will again make a good living for his family.

My quest for the Clarkes led me to one of the oldest residences on upper Broad Street. While this section no longer enjoys the prestige of former days, several of Augusta's prominent families still maintain residences there. The rain was pouring as I stepped warily up the walk in order to evade numerous puddles as I stepped settled in the low places.

Mr. Clarke came to the door in answer to my ring and asked me to come in.

“My wife is back in the kitchen,” he said graciously, “Excuse me while I call her.” He looked at me with a very puzzled expression as I said:

“I'll be glad to see Mrs. Clarke but my real business is with you.”

I explained to him that we were making a study of people who had seen their financial security vanish completely during the economic recession of the past few years.

“Well,” he said thoughtfully and with amusement, “If you think I have anything interesting enough to help you, fire away with 2 your questions and I'll do the best I can.

“So you want me to start at the beginning. Well, I first saw the light of day May 17, 1869 in Oglethorpe County not far from Athens. I was fifth in a family of eight children. My father was a farmer and had two plantations. All during the Civil War rumors were rife that all land was to be confiscated by the government. Trying to evade such a calamity my father sold his property for Confederate money. Of course, when the war closed he was flat broke and had a large family to support. Those were indeed hard days.

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"I have often heard my mother tell of the days of privation that followed the war. They rented land and my father worked so hard trying to get another foothold. He was unsuccessful and finally, broken in health and spirit he died when he was only 48 years old leaving my mother with eight children.

"Where did you obtain your education Mr. Clark?" I asked.

"Well," he answered. "This will no doubt surprise you, but my entire schooling was crowded into about six months. This was scattered over a three-year period, two months out of each year - between crops. Then we would get up at 4 in the morning, feed the stock, eat breakfast and take our tin pails and walk about three miles to the one-room log house that was used for the school. Most of the time our lunch consisted of bread and syrup.

"When I was 14 years old I went to Florida and got a job at a sawmill, that paid me 33 1/3 cents an hour. When I had been there 3 seven months I had saved \$250. At this time my mother was in desperate need and I could hardly wait to get home to give it to her.

"My father was sick for about seven months. In those days farmers were extended sufficient credit by the landowners to furnish commodities for their families. This was called a grocery run and was payable when crops were gathered. With all of the extra expense brought about by father's illness we were unable to pay for our run and they took everything we had. Included were a yoke of oxen and two horses, which deprived us of the means to cultivate our land. They also seized four cows and six hogs that had been killed and salted ready to cure. These constituted our winter meat supply. You can readily understand what my \$250. meant to my mother just at this time.

"Next I got a job with a cousin of mine who was a contractor. He promised to let me start at 75 cents a day and as soon as I had learned enough so he could leave me with a job he would raise me to a dollar a day. Somehow he never paid me but 75 cents a day. I got

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tired of waiting and left him. I got a job with a railroad foreman, who was building trestles, at \$1.50 a day. As soon as my cousin heard of it he went to my boss and told him that I was only an apprentice and that 75 cents was all I should be paid. So the foreman laid me off.

"I was 23 years old now and decided that advancement was too slow in the country, so I made up my mind to come to Augusta. My first city job was in a grocery and bar at \$25 a month. After a few months another man offered me \$15 a week to take charge of his 4 place at the corner of Eleventh and Broad Streets. I worked with him for more than a year and then became ill. I soon realized that a boarding house was no place for a sick man and I wanted my mother. I think a part of my trouble was homesickness so I went home to stay until I was well.

"When I came back to Augusta my employer had put someone in my place and then, too, he was planning to sell out. Before very long I got a job with the Bell Telephone Company. The work was hard, the hours long and the pay was very small. I had to run lines and tote polls.

"When someone wanted a phone cut in, we had to walk with a big coil of wire over the one shoulder and carry our tools and the phone. After doing all of this when we arrived at some of the places the people would say they had decided they couldn't afford a phone. This was very discouraging as we were paid on a commission basis.

"Often, when I would get up in the morning my hands were so sore I couldn't close them until I had bathed them in hot water.

"Later on the company furnished a horse and wagon and the work was a little lighter. I had the privilege of listening in on the first long distance call from Atlanta and was filled with wonder. I can still recall how proud I was to have had a part in bringing it about although I was only a lineman.

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"Inside of another year I agreed to do carpenter work for a man who was building one of Augusta's large hotels. To obtain the prevailing \$1.50 wages I had to join the union. In just a short time there was a strike that delayed the hotel's completion for more than five months. I wasn't keen on strikes and as the union was either on a strike or planning for one, I decided to take up another line of work.

"This desire led me to a livery stable and I got a job selling mules and horses in Richmond and the adjoining counties on a commission basis. I saved a little money and bought a pair of mules for myself for \$50. Then I bought a 2-mule wagon, paying \$5.00 down and agreeing to pay the balance as I could.

"Now I was in a position to work for myself. I secured a contract to haul poles for the city. I worked early and late most of the time and did the loading alone. Every morning I just had to roll out of bed I was too sore and stiff to raise up. But I soon paid for my mules and wagon.

"I was trying to get enough money ahead to open a barroom for I know there was good money to be made selling whiskey. After a few more months I bought an established business for \$400.

"I had a mixed clientele but as the liquor the man had on hand was no good trade began to fall off. Knowing what the trouble was helped a lot and I got busy immediately. First I tore out all of the old fixtures and replaced them with modern ones. I fixed the place up generally and restocked it with good whiskey.

"the man from whom I had purchased the business advanced the money taking a mortgage on the place. Trade began to pick up at once. Within three months I took up the mortgage and then believe me, I really started to make money.

"But my troubles were not over. You see, I was buying my labels from the former owner and I found out later that he was selling me printed labels when I should have been using

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lithographed ones. When the Upper Ten Wholesale House found this out they prosecuted me. Upon learning that I was purchasing them through someone else they wanted me to turn State's evidence. I refused flatly to turn against the man who had set me up in business so it cost ne me \$1400. I didn't mind, however, for at that time my sales were averaging from \$900 to \$1000 a month and 50% of that was clear profit. In those days you could really make money selling whiskey. You can't do much now because there's too much revenue.

“Shortly after this I moved to the corner of Jackson and Ellis Streets, and opened one of the best barrooms in the city. The fixtures cost \$1500 and I carried the very highest grade of whiskey, wine and beer. My stock was valued at from three to four thousand dollars. It was at this location that I was honored by having Ex-President Taft come into my place for refreshments during an intermission at the old opera house, which was just across the street.

“No, he didn't drink whiskey he had a ginger ale and when he finished he told me that I certainly had a nice place. I thanked him and he went back to the theater.”

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“Were you hard to get along with after that honor Mr. Clarke? Did your hat still fit you? I asked.

“Well,” he laughed, “I admit that I was proud of the honor but I was still Jack to my friends.

“And then came the 18th Amendment! I had to close up and the fixtures wouldn't have brought a quarter at a forced sale. I had to fall back on my side-line which was a job as caretaker for the Savannah River Lumber Company. This firm owned a lot of land along the river and they told me I could use all of it I wanted.

“so I started to farm. I bought 4 mules and for the next 2 years I made good crops of corn and other produce.

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"Then war was declared; all my Negroes left me, and I had to make another change. I made a bid on clearing the land for Camp Hancock and got the contract.

"I had 8 mules and 4 wagons. I received \$9 a day for each team and the same for myself. For a time I rode a saddle horse and superintended the work but later I bought a car. The work lasted for six months.

"When this was over I received an appointment as labor agent for the government. I got \$9 a day for the use of my car with gas and oil furnished and my salary was also \$9 a day.

"Just what were your duties in this position?" I wanted to know.

"I went through the country employing help for the camp.

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I tell you I never saw so much money. I had one little Negro that I paid \$3 a week just to carry water. I stayed until the camp was dismantled and the last nail was pulled.

"I had saved a good part of what I made and a friend and I went into partnership operating a concrete contracting business. We paved many of the streets of Augusta.

"Then I graded fairways for the Forest hills, Municipal, Country Club and Bobby Jones Golf Courses.

"Next people began to talk depression and work of any kind was hard to get. Those who had money were afraid of their shadows.

"By a good turn of fortune, about this time I was awarded a contract to build 5 miles or roadbed for the Georgia and Florida Railroad. The work was centered around Keysville, Georgia.

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"In some way the news got out among the Negroes and even before I was able to secure bond they came by the hundreds asking for work, saying they would take it for anything I would pay them. I could hardly understand it for up to this point it was hard to get a Negro to work for less than 50 cents an hour.

"I selected 50 from about 300 of them and set-up camp near Keysville. I took this job with absolutely no experience. I had never even seen a wheeler before. I just believed I could do it and I did.

"But let as toll you I had more than one kind of experience on this job. Just about this time the road went into the hands of a receiver. When next pay day came there was no money to pay off the hands. I really believe the men would have worked right on for we were feeding them. However, I knew that wasn't the proper thing to do. I had \$2000 on hand and I offered it as a loan to the road. They accepted and I deposited the money to their credit in the Georgia Railroad Bank.

"The rest of my money was in the Merchant's Bank. Just a few days after I had made the loan to the Railroad, the Merchants' Bank closed its doors and I lost every penny of my \$42,000 that was on deposit there.

"This was a terrific blow but it was no-time to give up. I kept on with my work and when the job was finished I had paid for my 6 mules and wheelers and had cleared \$2500.

"Within the next few weeks I got a job with the Charleston and Western Carolina Railroad at [Hattiesville?], South Carolina, grading and working gravel pits. I cleared \$400 but while I was in camp I took malarial fever and came near dying. I had to come home and it was several weeks before I was able to work.

"When I had recovered fully I worked with one of our local construction companies, just taking jobs when I could get them, which wasn't very often.



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"There is an old saying that trouble never comes singly and it certainly was the case with us. My wife took sick just about this time and she was ill for more than a year before she passed away. The loss of my companion and the extra expense came near 10 putting me out of business.

"I owned 28 mules. We had no work and they were eating their heads off. I had made several unsuccessful attempts to sell them so there was nothing to do but keep them. Shortly after this I lost 19 mules that had cost \$200 apiece. Some of them were killed and the others got sick and died.

"Then the Savannah River went on a rampage and while I lost three more mules, it netted me a job. I bought 3 trucks and got a contract to help repair the levee. The weather was bad, we couldn't work regularly and when the truck payments came due I couldn't meet them. I lost the trucks and the \$500 I had paid on them.

"In order to complete my contract I was forced to hire trucks for which I had to pay \$1.00 an hour. I finished the job in four months but did not realize any profit. In other words I lost money and was down to my last dollar when I learned that the Gulf Refining Company had bought the house and lot on the corner of 13th and Broad Streets and that the building would be torn down.

"I got in touch with the manager immediately and offered him \$200 for the building. This was his answer.

"'Clarke, if you will move the building, it belongs to you.'

"I got a bunch of Negroes together, tore it down and sold the salvaged lumber for \$1000.

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"About this time I married again. My second wife was anxious for us to try a soft drink and sandwich shop and with the little cash I had, I think it was about \$150, I rented a place on the 800 block of Broad Street for \$75 a month.

"It wasn't long after we opened that my health failed completely and we were forced to close. I stored my fixtures and went home for treatment. It took 3 months for me to get on my feet again and we reopened the shop and stayed there for 2 years. My wife and I both worked. We managed to make a living but very little extra money found its way to the bank.

"I decided my overhead was too heavy, so we moved to the 500 block on Broad Street. When we were there just a short time our place burned up. We only had \$200 insurance and we thought it was about time to quit the soft drink business.

"And now we only have this 10-room house. We rent furnished rooms and furnish meals to those who want them. Yes, we are making expenses but the chief responsibility is on my wife and I want to make the living for my family.

"I'm planning to make a come-back. Just how I don't know but as I said in the beginning, I believe I'm still man enough to take a man's place in the world and also have sense enough to make my own living."

"Well, Mr. Clarke," I told him, "I am sure that with your spirit and determination, you can't fail."

"You don't need me to tell you that the World War caused the 12 depression. It was only a repetition of history. You see, I suffered terribly from the effects of the Civil War, but it was a whole lot worse this time because I had so much more.

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“People in general felt it more because they didn't realize what they were up against. Most of them thought it was only temporary and would soon pass. Prior to the depression folks bought automobiles and lived far beyond their means.

“Suddenly money ceased to flow like water. Then people were unable to pay their debts and of course they couldn't buy anything. The merchants were overstocked and couldn't meet their notes when they were due. Property values dropped and as many of the banks had exhausted their reserve, they had to close. You couldn't borrow a dollar from your own mother and I believe the country was on the verge of a revolution when President Roosevelt was inaugurated. He has saved the people in one way and in another the W.P.A. ruined them.

“Take as for instance, I am a contractor and my business is excavating, hauling, /and grading. I can't even get one contract! Why? Because every city and county contract is awarded to the W.P.A.”

“Well,” I said, “You will have to admit that while the W.P.A. has hurt you it has at the same time given employment to thousands of people who without that work would have been hungry.”

“I do know that,” he said, “And I am glad. I may be forced to ask them for work myself some day, but not until I have tried everything else first.

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“I will be 71 years old in May. And get this again, I am coming back! And soon. Some day before very long I will again be able to write a fair-sized check and the bank will honor it.”